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# ETHICAL VALUES, INDIVIDUALS, AND CORPORATIONS: A MEASURE OF SMALL THINGS

*Dr. Jay Gould*

Recent events are a reminder that when it comes to government purchases, the issue of personal and business ethics comes into question. Since ethics and character education extend back to the days of Socrates and Plato, is the concept of ethics education relevant? As published in the *Annals of the American Academy* in 2004, the surprising answer as a result of scientific research is “yes.” Despite the fact that a group of collected individuals will normally reflect individuals’ self-ish impulses, when a similar group’s character education is faithfully implemented, a critical mediating factor of emotional attachment is introduced. This article reflects how an individual or a business may act as a moral agent.

**W**hen leadership truly wants ethics to happen on their watch and individuals to accept the vision personally and programmatically, the corporate result is: people *get it, buy into it, and live it*. So among steps taken to educate its workforce, the Department of Defense (DoD) requires yearly ethics training. In support of DoD’s requirement, the Missile Defense Agency (MDA) conducted a Business Ethics Stand-Down Day on November 30, 2005. It was the MDA Director Lieutenant General Henry A. Obering’s intention to create an opportunity for the MDA workforce to recognize the ethical dilemmas they might encounter and reflect on how they could possibly react.

It may be asked if personal ethics define the baseline for problem solving and decision making. The answer, of course, is “yes.” A recent study, funded by the National Institute of Mental Health and reported by the American Psychological Association, indicates that personal ethical values provide biological and

psychological protection from the adverse effects of stress. It would therefore seem impossible to successfully work and sustain quality transformation, continually improve processes, and accomplish behavioral change and collaborative customer satisfaction in an unethical manner.

Ethics is the base component of the organizational culture of beliefs, agreements, perceptions, assumptions, values, goals, capabilities, and deeds. Individual ethical values combine to form corporate culture and the quality of corporate ethics. It has been said that the true value of an organization is reflected in the multitude of the small things that each individual does or does not allow to be done. What is encouraged, what is allowed, what is known and not known send clear messages as to why ethics is really important.

A case in point: Forty-two years ago, during the hottest part of the Cold War, the U.S. military worked feverishly to not only field Titan II intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), but also to build the operational bases from which they might be launched. The Titan II Program Office was structured as an integrated team with every corporate discipline represented. One of the author's classmates, representing the Operational Division, confided that what first appeared to be an operational readiness anomaly at U.S. Air Force turn-key sites was systemic. The technical specifications required the missiles to not leak fluids, but unexpected weld and metal porosity caused the missiles to leak gasses, namely Unsymmetrical Di-Methyl Hydrazine ([CH<sub>3</sub>]<sub>2</sub>N<sub>2</sub>H<sub>2</sub>) & Nitrogen Tetroxide (N<sub>2</sub>O<sub>4</sub>).

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To send a clear organizational message about the effort required to resolve this multifaceted technical issue and its ethical importance, the factory doors were closed and a two-shift senior management team moved into the construction trailers placed across the factory entrance to address the design and manufacturing issues attendant to missile welds and component porosity. A schedule-driven program gave way to resolving programmatic technology failures. Propellant gas leaks became the 24/7 issue. The author of this article was assigned to the second shift as the deputy to the Chief of Engineering.

Subject matter experts (SMEs) from across the nation came to offer their advice and constructive thought. Alternate designs of valves piping, burst diaphragms, conduits, O-ring seals, weld design, and absolutely every other aspect were examined

in detail, tested, and retested to resolve the issues. The production line was fed from three sides as missiles returned from the field to be fixed and intimately tested via trace element; helium gas was used to determine to what extent and where gaseous leaks were occurring. Some six months later, “Operation Wrap Up” ended with technical solutions for every gas leak. When these missiles were retired and taken out of service, they were stored to be used many years later as satellite launch vehicles. Ethical moral development happened through social interaction, and the cognitive conflicts that occurred as men of good faith defined numerous technical solution sets, will live forever in the minds of those involved.

Why would that experience have such a profound effect? Lawrence Kohlberg, professor at Harvard University and the University of Minnesota, suggests that individuals progress through sequential stages of moral development by being presented with moral dilemmas. Through discussion, they see the reasonableness of higher stages of morality, which encourage development in that direction. Kohlberg believes that most moral development occurs through social interaction and the insights developed as a result of cognitive conflicts.

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The greatest cognitive conflict is fear. Dr. W. Edwards Deming, the founding father of the quality movement, believed driving out fear was the most important of his 14 Points. So long as fear is present in an organization, ethics, the base component of organizational culture, are threatened. By driving out fear, removing barriers that rob people of pride of workmanship, and instituting a vigorous program of education, self-improvement, and training, the rank and file of the organization who form its productive heart and soul will be able to constantly improve every corporate process and service.

Trust, the essential component of quality, can only be earned over time by behavior and decisions that are ethically based. Trust invokes images of truthfulness, candor, straightforwardness, and sincerity.

Fidelity invokes images of loyalty, steadfastness, and commitments to goals and objectives. Communication is ongoing, open, without hidden agendas, and buttressed by sound decisions and actions.

## MEASURING THE SMALL THINGS

In Southeast Asian industrial parks, the ethical underpinnings of Six Sigma quality production are generated by the desire of the workers to emulate what they believe is the ethical mastery exhibited by the United States. A former foreign national, initially trained in the quality movement philosophies in one of these plants, married an American, and graduated summa cum laude with a degree in computer science. When she applied for a federal position in a very prestigious organization, she was informed that as a condition of employment she would be required to submit to drug testing, a background investigation, personal interviews, and lie detector tests. Having never been exposed to such stringent security clearance requirements, she was amazed but impressed by the necessity for such rites of passage. During the process, her co-workers offered suggestions describing the social norms and methods of operation of the organization.

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One person suggested, “When they give you the lie detector test, they will ask if you have ever taken a pencil home from work. Of course, you must answer yes.” She responded, “I do not understand. Why must I say yes?” Her mentor, looking somewhat aghast, said, “Well of course, you have to say yes. Everyone does.” Rather than pursue a concept she did not understand, she returned home to relate the story to her husband. His initial reaction was to laugh, for he understood her quandary. His wife was an ethical person and would not take a pencil from the office. Her husband responded saying, “Look, you do not have to say yes. For you, it *is* a lie. Tell the truth and never respond to any question with an answer someone has told you to give; just tell the truth.”

The next day, her husband, who was also employed by the Federal Government, told the story to a fellow worker who had spent some time at an agency similar to the one in which the wife was employed. The fellow worker responded, “You gave her the wrong answer. The part about always telling the truth is right, but the pencil aspect is wrong. Have her go to work and take a pencil so she can say yes. Everyone does it.”

The husband recounted this conversation to his wife. On hearing that she should go to work and take a pencil, her indignant response was, “I would rather purchase

pencils and take them into the office than do that. Why should I just say yes? At times, I just do not understand you Americans.” Her response was triggered by her personal ethical values. To her, ethics are not situational. She had earlier adopted a learned belief about even small things: “To be an American is to be a person that does not even take a pencil from the office.” The young woman’s perception of what America represented was defined by her belief in a quality ethos and ethics that were coupled with her training in a U.S. firm in Southeast Asia.

## ETHICS AND THE QUALITY MOVEMENT

This woman did not know at the time that the ethical principles she espoused were a part of Deming’s management philosophy, which dominated the manner and method of how these American plants operated. The ethics of Deming’s *quality movement* deeply and profoundly affected the lives of all who came in contact with what is believed to be a moral and ethical philosophy.

The beginnings of Deming’s philosophy took place during World War II at Aberdeen Proving Ground, MD. In conversations with him, he often recalled the names of the young West Point officers who gathered on the porch of the officers’ barracks on Sunday afternoons to wax philosophically. In their discussion of the *Cadet Prayer*, the issue was raised. How easy, in practice, is it to:

- Choose the harder right over the easier wrong?
- Strengthen and increase admiration for honest dealing and clean thinking?
- Never be content with a half-truth when the whole can be won?
- Have no fear when truth and right are in jeopardy?

The rhetorical question is: “Is it easy to live above the common level of life?”

- Rules, regulations, and laws will never resolve the *Drayun Syndrome*.
- Recent research proves personal ethics serve as a clarifying tonic in times of stress.
- Individual ethical values combine to form corporate culture and the quality of corporate ethics.

## SUMMARY

“The true value of an organization is reflected in the multitude of the small things that each individual does or does not allow to be done. What is encouraged, what is allowed, what is known and not known send clear messages as to why ethics are really important.”

When specifications required the missile to be leak free, employing corporate ethics resolved the missile gas leaks. The corporation stepped up to the plate, shutting down its own plant.

What about the young lady undergoing security screening? Her personal belief in American ethical philosophy resulted in a new life in a new nation. However, after experiencing life in the United States, she now asks the question, “Can Americans, as individuals and corporations, be what we believe them to be?”

Let us talk about a small thing—a pencil? Not everyone does!

#### MANAGING EDITOR'S NOTE

This submission has been modified to meet the publishing requirements of the *Defense ARJ*.



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